

Federal agency announces aid going to Greensburg

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Greensburg residents are receiving aid from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help them repair their county courthouse and build new homes following last spring's devastating tornado.

The USDA's Rural Development division announced Monday that it is providing more than \$2.2 million to help renovate the Kiowa County Courthouse. Greensburg is the county seat.

Rural Development officials also said they are providing additional low-interest loans to help some Greensburg residents to build new, energy efficient homes to replace ones they lost. Families already have broken ground on 20 such homes, and the USDA plans to provide loans for an additional 30.

With an expected \$30 million in home loans and other aid for public infrastructure projects, total Rural Development assistance for Greensburg could reach \$50 million, said state director Chuck Banks.

"This is going to be an ongoing process," he said during a telephone interview. "It's going to be a sizable commitment to the community."

The county expects to spend about \$4.9 million repairing its courthouse, and its district court and other offices are housed in seven trailers on the grounds. Other funds for the repairs are coming from insurance, the county and other relief dollars.

Rural Development is providing a grant of more than \$1.9 million, then providing an additional 25-year, low-interest loan of \$300,000. The county expects to finish the work by May 2009.

Gene West, the Kiowa County Commission's chairman, said the repaired courthouse will have more insulation, high-efficiency glass windows and energy-savings heating and cooling systems. But the work also will restore much of its original appearance from when it was built in 1914.

He said the building was damaged when the tornado took a Pontiac Bonneville in a local police impound lot, slammed it into the southeast corner, pulled it up to roof level and tossed it over the other side of the building. Damage to the roof allowed rain in, causing water damage.

"It's a historical-type building," West said. "It's one that we needed to try to repair if it was repairable."

Rural Development officials are working with 19 nonprofit and religious organizations in a housing program that provides low-interest loans to Greensburg residents seeking to build new, "green" homes.

The division is providing about \$540,000 in aid to help supervise the construction, with the United Way of the Plains in Wichita providing about \$560,000.

The low-interest, Rural Development loans to the homeowners will average \$60,000 each, Banks said, but the homes being built will have an average value of between \$125,000 and \$130,000. The difference will be the result of volunteer labor and the homeowners' "sweat equity," he said.

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